

Part 2



LIFESTYLES
HOME
& GARDENS

Selling
Nostalgia
In a Basket

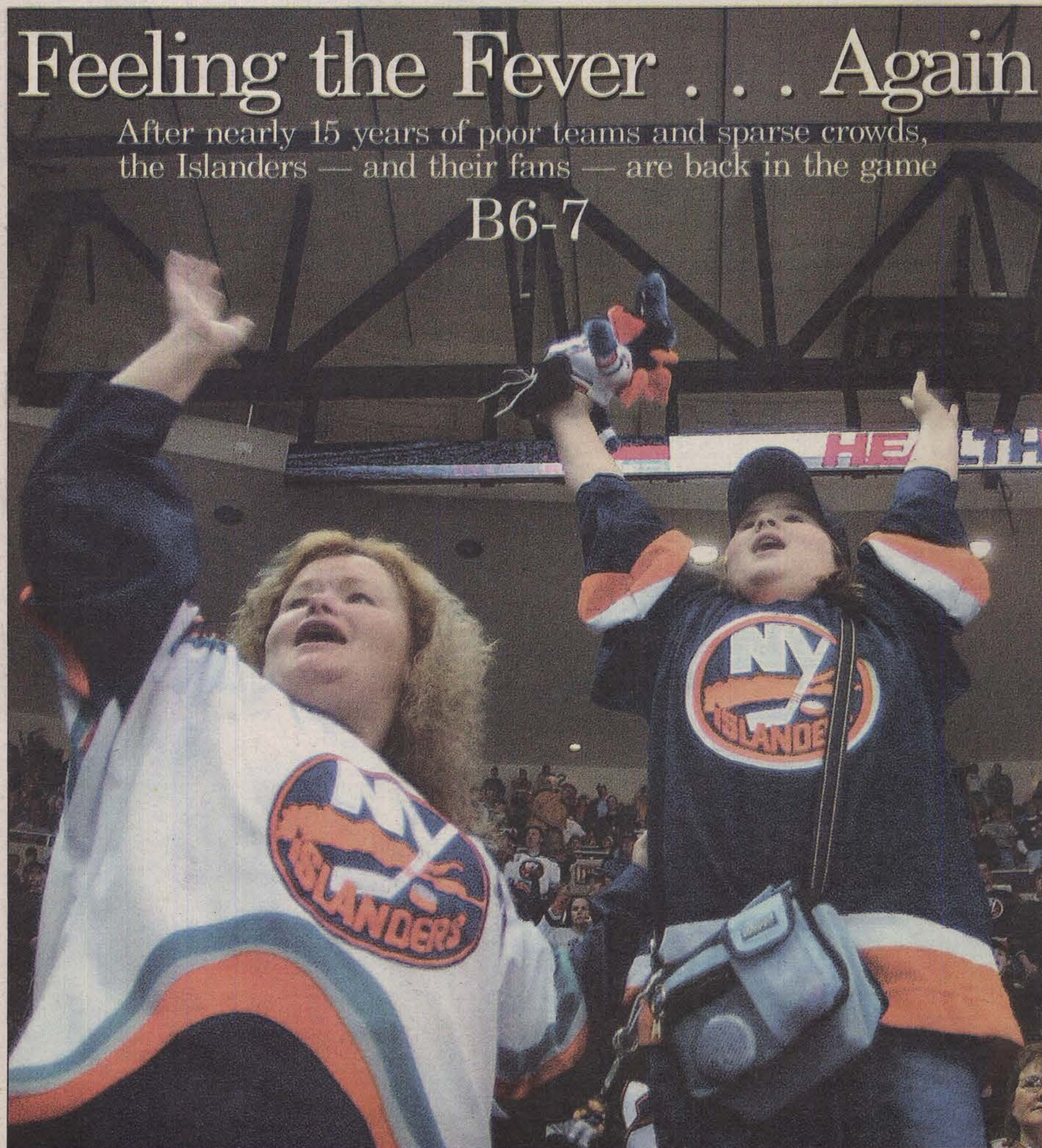
B18

Sunday on TV: A Cable Winter Preview, B3

Feeling the Fever . . . Again

After nearly 15 years of poor teams and sparse crowds, the Islanders — and their fans — are back in the game

B6-7



Islanders fans Fran Berkowitz and daughter Robyn, 11, of Centereach let loose at a home game.

Photo by Thomas A. Ferrara

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Finally!

By Bill Jensen

For long-suffering Islanders fans, the team's success this season revives emotions of 'the old days'

IT'S THE KIND of cold that makes you think of only one thing: getting inside. The wind that swooshes unimpeded from the North Shore to the paved-over Hempstead Plains that are the Nassau Coliseum parking lot is unyielding. Fans hustle from their cars to the turnstiles, forgoing any thought of a tailgate party or parking-lot roughhousing on a Saturday night. But as the hundreds surge forward, 10 men stay in place.

It's a strange sight for a midseason Islanders game in the post-Stanley Cup champion era. Even stranger is that the men standing in the chill, all ticket scalpers, are emitting a cry to purchase tickets from fans walking into the game just as frequently as they are shouting that they have some to sell. For the first time in years, their supply of choice seats is low.

"I just got the word that six or seven guys just came back," says one scalper with a wind-whipped face who has been selling seats outside for the last 20 years. "There were about four of us diehards that stayed over the past five years. Business is good."

Back when the Islanders were kings of two counties, when they were winning four straight Cups (1980-83) and making the playoffs year after year from the mid '70s to the late '80s, the Coliseum was the place to be on Long Island. The mile-long stretch of Hempstead Turnpike, from Merrick Avenue to the gates of the Hofstra University campus, was filled with car horns blurring out a mono-note version of the popular chant of the day: "Let's Go Islanders! Let's Go Islanders!"

And fans were not satisfied with simply showing up at a game, watching it and leaving. They wanted to strut their stuff in central Nassau, going to confident dinners at Borelli's before the game and celebratory toasts at the Salty Dog after. Being an Islanders fan was a culture unto itself, and, at least on game nights, Long Island was a hockey hot spot.

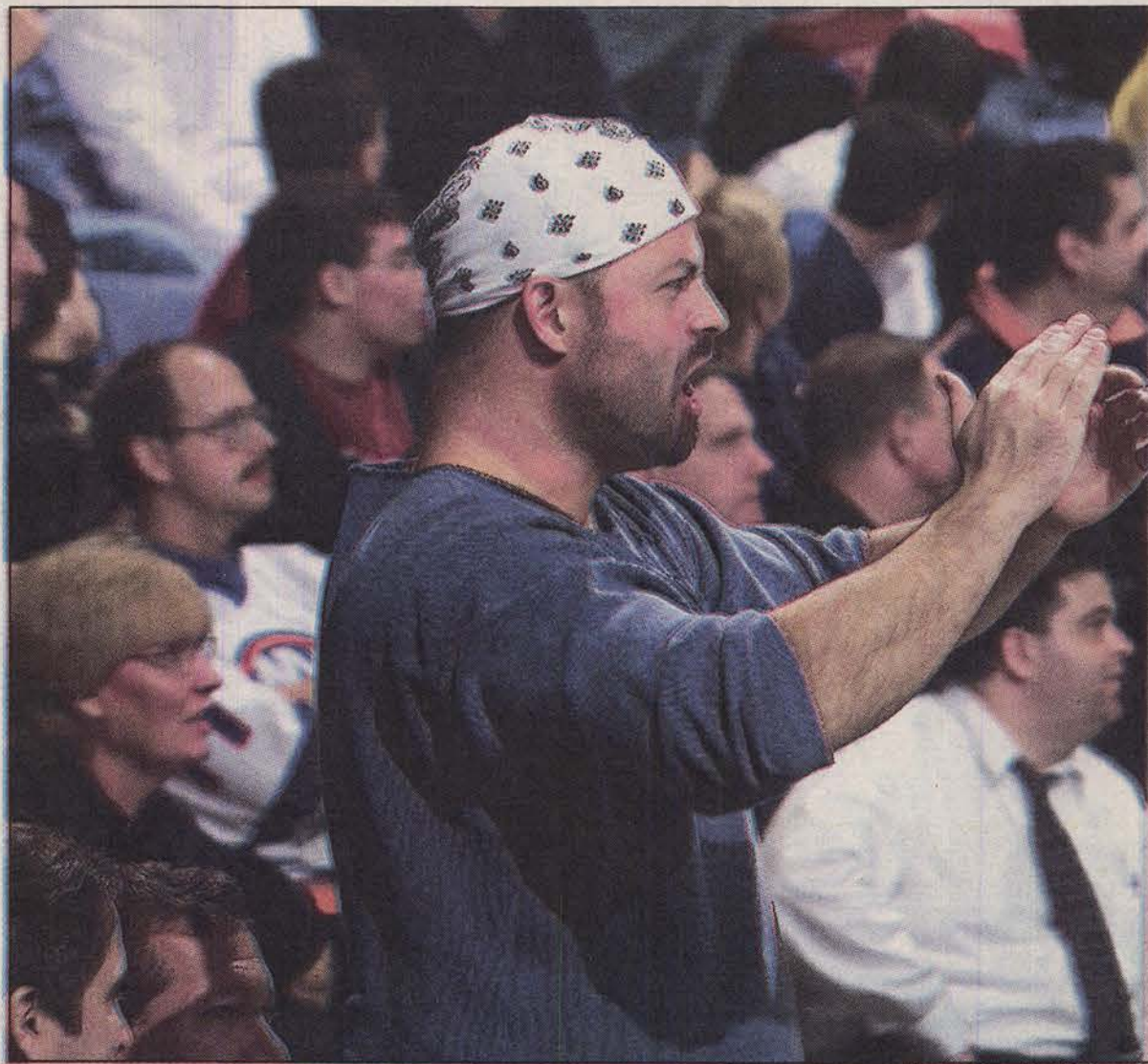
Tonight, after nearly 15 years of sparse crowds, a revolving locker room door, crooked and stingy owners, and last-place finishes, the Islanders are winning games. And with Islanders wins returns Islanders ethos.

The John Tonelli jersey that he bought when the rugged left winger joined the team in 1978 is a little tighter on Dan DeGorter's frame than in the glory days, but he's wearing it tonight. The 47-year-old manufacturer's rep from Merrick was a season ticket holder for 20 years. He gave up hope, and the seats, last year.

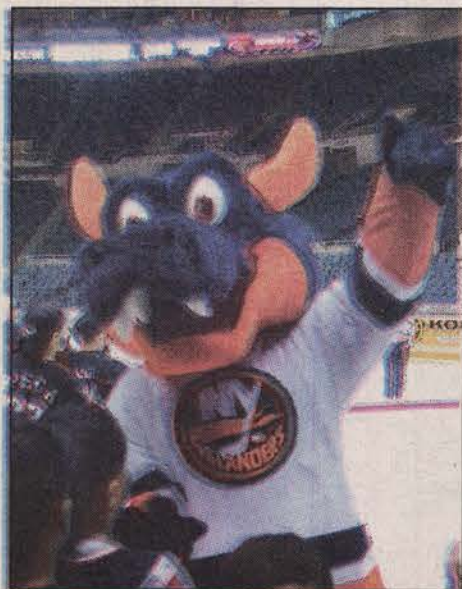
"They have called me back," DeGorter says with a laugh as he shares a plate of wings with his son Jon, 15, at Hooters on Hempstead Turnpike in East Meadow.

Like many fans from the glory days, DeGorter

David Rabinovitz has something to cheer about.



Newsday Photo / Paul J. Bereswill



Photos by Thomas A. Ferrara

Sparky, the Isles' mascot, tries to stir up the crowd.



Chris and Neil Diamond at The Blue Line Grill.



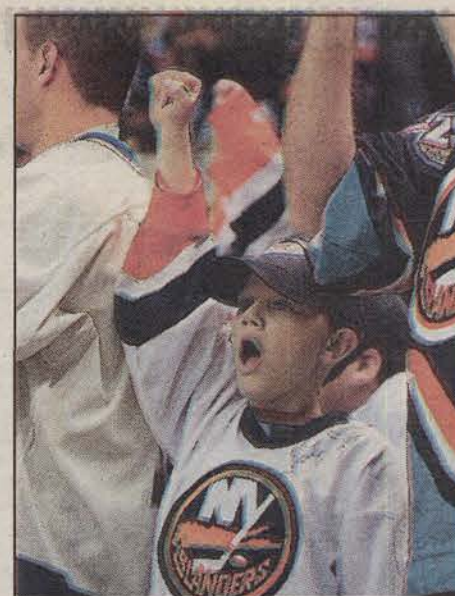
Russian forward Oleg Kvasha signs autographs.



Bill Hayes never misses a home game.



Donna Hutchinson shops for gifts for her sons.



John Karikas lets the team know how he feels.

used to conduct his pregame rituals at joints like Bill's Meadowbrook and Bogart's. But as the team began to waver, the crowds began to thin. In the recent past, going out before a game became a lost tradition, as acknowledging another fan wearing an Islanders jersey became less of a proud fist-shaking and more of an empathetic head nod for what was to come. But an hour and a half before the game, Hooters, the new go-to pregame spot amid the bars in the ripple of the Coliseum's new splash, is an orange and blue sea of wing-eating, beer-drinking fans.

"They're sold out and, pretty much, so are we," says Tony Perisi, Hooters day manager. "Last year, those who did come would come at 6:15. They wouldn't care if they missed half of the first period. Now, they're coming earlier. They don't want to miss anything."

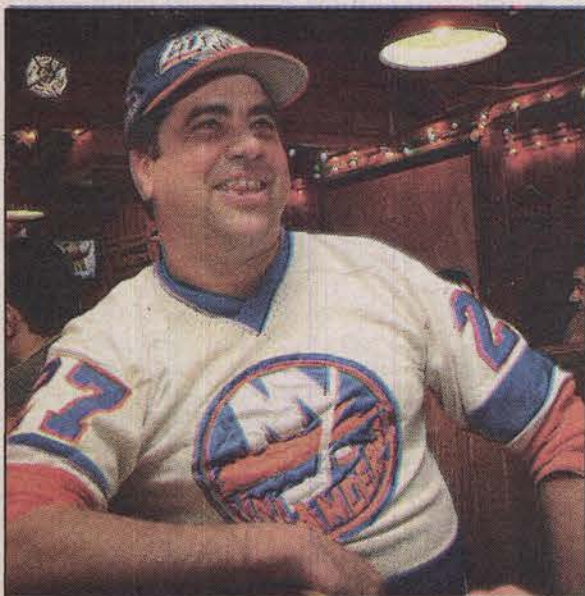
Just as at Fuddrucker's and Bertucci's around the corner on Merrick Avenue, the people here converge less for the need to eat and drink and more for the camaraderie of fandom.

"When my parents used to take me to games, we used to just pick up sandwiches at the deli," says Jimmy Sullivan, 16. Sullivan is out with three friends from Hicksville. "I think we're going to keep going out before the game like this."

"I like seeing all the Islander fans getting ready for the game, see how pumped they are," says Matt Sviridoff, 9, of West Sayville, going to the game with his dad.

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While the fans cling to their beer mugs, first-line center Alexei Yashin clutches a blowtorch, crafting the curve on a blade in the Islanders stick room deep in the catacombs of the Coliseum a few hours before the game. Yashin was born in Sverdlovsk, Russia, spent seven seasons in Ottawa, and now gets paid to



Dan DeGorter stops at Hooters before a game.

score goals at least 82 games a year wearing a silhouette of Long Island on his jersey.

"These fans were hungry for good hockey," says Yashin, his right index finger wrapped from an injury incurred in his previous game. "We give them something to cheer about. The fans are very happy, and they make me feel very good."

Yashin is now a Long Islander. He bought a house near his girlfriend's mother's place, his girlfriend being East Williston native and supermodel Carol Alt, who has added some glamour to the Islanders by cheering on her guy every night in the Coliseum stands.

Yashin is here because of the wallets and spirit of new owners Charles Wang and Sanjay Kumar (of Islandia-based Computer Associates). After purchasing the team in 2000, Wang and Kumar gave virtual free reign to general manager Mike Milbury to build a team that would fill the seats. Milbury acquired Yashin in a multi-player trade.

A few steps away from Yashin, Mike Peca, another boon from the new ownership, is sitting on a bench inside the locker room. More than any other player, Peca is deemed the savior by the fans. Also acquired in a trade in the offseason, he was named captain before playing a single game in an Islanders jersey. All signs point to Peca being in this thing for the long haul. Signing a five-year contract, the 27-year-old center recently bought a house in Huntington.

A major component of Islanders culture in the past was player interaction. Fan favorites such as Clark Gillies and Bobby Nystrom moved to Long Island full-time (and are still here) and could be seen at the local Chuck E. Cheese as well as on the ice. While guys like Peca have yet to gain the celebrity status of Islanders past, they understand their importance to the community.

"It's a great responsibility to have an ability to impact an organization," says Peca, road-weary face carrying a 5-o'clock shadow that consistently works overtime. From 1995 to 2000, he visited the Island as a member of the Buffalo Sabres before sitting out the 2000-01 season in a contract dispute.

"The one thing I always remember is how sparse the crowds were," Peca says bluntly. "It was really boring."

A soft-spoken Canadian, Peca is the last to boast he's an antidote to boredom. But as he takes the ice in front of 16,000 fans, the house quivers.

* * *

The Islanders are sold out again. Two years ago, after the team traded away fan favorite Ziggy Palffy, along with many other players in a host of cost-cutting salary dumps, the season ticket base fell to a league low of 2,800. Today, the number is up to 8,000. They have sold out six games this season, compared to four all last year, and are averaging 14,000, compared to 10,000 last season. Coming by tickets is not "Lion King" difficult, by any means, but it's getting there.

"It's fun again," says Peter Karikas, as he and his son John, 8, eat ice-cream cones as they watch the game from their second-row seats. "We used to come, and he didn't know what the score was, but he knew we were going to lose." Now, John has to fight with his sister over who will accompany Dad to the next

game.

"Next year, I'm going to have to get three seats," says Karikas, a restaurant owner from Garden City.

Unlike Madison Square Garden, where suit-wearing businessmen are the norm in the good seats, the Coliseum's lower level is filled on the weekends with families.

"It's like the old days. It's like flashbacks. It's like 'finally,'" says Fran Berkowitz, 42, a Centereach substitute teacher, at the game with her 11-year-old daughter, Robyn, who is clutching a stuffed doll of the Islanders' new mascot, Sparky. "I love it."

The Islanders never got that new arena that seemingly everyone was whining about in the early and mid '90s. And, save for luxury boxes, they don't need a new one. The general architecture of the building hasn't changed since Bryan Trottier and Mike Bossy patrolled its frozen water — an oval building with great sight lines. But the atmosphere shows signs of 21st century corporate encroachment. Islanders power plays are now "sponsored" by Keyspan. The scoreboard is a state-of-the-art giant TV screen, flashing numerous advertisements at breakneck speed. Beers are 6 bucks each. Vendors also sell smoothies and Starbucks and sushi.

But the most important facets of the Islanders experience are the same: Fans go crazy for goals, saves and whenever the scoreboard shows that the Rangers are losing a game across town.

The Rangers are the team that has garnered most of the attention, even on Long Island, in the past 10 years. Rangers fans are quick to point out that the current wave of Islanders popularity is merely bandwagon-jumping from fair-weather fans. No Islanders fan will admit that he or she gave up on the team. They were still going to games — now they are just going to a whole lot more.

"Everybody knew this was a hockey town," new Islanders head coach Peter Laviolette says, defending the now-big crowds. "The fans were out there. And if the players go out there and play their hearts out, the fans will come. And, usually, that leads to success."

Peer around the stands at the Coliseum, and you can identify plenty of fresh-off-the-rack jerseys. Peca, Yashin and goalie Chris Osgood are the fans' major choices, and many people are showing up at the games and spending \$200 for a jersey of their new heroes.

Donna Hutchinson, a stay-at-home mom from Rockville Centre, is out Christmas shopping between periods. She has a specific list for her two boys: an Osgood jersey for her 11-year-old and a Peca for her 7-year-old, who is also getting an Islanders warm-up suit, a hat and a T-shirt.

"His nursery school teacher used to say he was the only Islanders fan left on Long Island," Hutchinson says.

Sitting across the way in section 309, row B, seat 11 is a fan at the other end of the age spectrum. Bill Hayes says he has never missed an Islanders game. Ever. In 30 years. Neither snowstorm, nor rainstorm, nor threat of falling scoreboard has kept him away. The 77-year-old retired security guard from East Meadow has seen the place go from a palace of

See ISLANDERS on B8

Finally!

ISLANDERS from B6

Part 2

champions to an arena sometimes referred to around the National Hockey League as The Nassau Mausoleum. A genteel man, he sits with a pad and pen, jotting down the number of every player that hits the ice for each shift. "What I see is more of a team effort," he says, laughing at the fact that all of his "friends" have returned.

* * *

After the game, fans still spill out into The Blue Line Grill, a bar on the Coliseum's lower concourse, to watch a live postgame radio interview with an Islanders player or coach.

Bob Sarnowski, 26, of Oyster Bay, is clutching a cowbell and drumstick in the center of the room. A 10-year veteran as a fan, Sarnowski has 220 vision in one eye, no vision in the other. He can't see the puck, can barely make out the teams. He judges the game by the sounds — and the shakes.

"You can't look forward to the game enough," says Sarnowski of the Coliseum's rediscovered vibe. "The chanting, the noise. You can be completely blind and you could feel it. The building shakes."

The room shakes when Peca walks in for an interview. In the corner of the room, Ed Woods, 40, a Port Authority police officer from Sunnyside, Queens, is fighting a losing battle against a plate of messy hot wings. He and childhood friend Lou Martini, 41, are sporting new jerseys they purchased when they bought a 12-game ticket package this season. The Blue Line will be the first stop on a late-night postgame tour.

"We wear the Islander jerseys to Flanagan's [a bar deep in Ranger-friendly Manhattan] after the game," says Martini, an actor. "We don't have to take them off before we go in. It's been a long time since someone patted me on the back for wearing an Islander jersey, especially on the Upper East Side."

"Especially anywhere!" Woods chimes in.

Across the Coliseum parking lot, there's a horde of fans buzzing around Champions sports bar in the lobby of the Long Island Marriott. At one corner of the room, Islanders players

Garth Snow and Adrian Aucoin are sharing a plate of nachos with Hall-of-Fame goalie and current goaltending coach Billy Smith. It's two hours after the game ended, and the place is packed.

"If it was a 7-1 loss, you would be falling asleep during the third period and want to go home," says Mike Pollack, 34, of Farmingdale, part of a group of friends swapping turns at a Golden Tee video game. "Now, you're coming off a certain high — that energy, that adrenaline, keeps you going."

Pollack's crew breaks into an argument as to whether the team can make it to the Stanley Cup finals this year. Most fans would be happy with just making the playoffs, which the Islanders haven't accomplished since 1994. But these guys want more.

"See this jersey?" says Brian Malone, 31, a mortgage banker from Carle Place, pointing to his chest. "They could play outdoors, at Christopher Morley Park, and we'd go. I don't need sushi and all that. I just want to win."

While Champions is filled with 20- and 30-somethings, the teenagers hit T.G.I. Fridays, where Joanna Schoener, 16, of Mineola is eating appetizers with friend Stephanie McDonald amid a bunch of fans bubbling about the game.

"There were times last year," says McDonald, 20, a student at Nassau Community College, "when you dreaded going to the games, 'cause you didn't want to see what happened."

"I'm getting season tickets next year when I can drive," says Schoener, her blond locks draped over a home white Islanders jersey crowded with autographs.

"Yeah, right," McDonald says.

"No, I am," a defiant Schoener counters.

That's new school. But for some fans, the tradition hasn't changed. Across town, the Colony Diner on Hempstead Turnpike in East Meadow is relatively sedate. Bill Hayes is in the same spot he's been after a game for years. If his stomach is cooperating, he might get a tuna melt or a bowl of soup. But, win or lose, he'll always get coffee.

"After the games lately," Hayes says with a smile, "my coffee tastes good." ■

Bill Jensen is a freelance writer.

One Family's Life

DOGS from B2

eyes," drank Scotch and sang along with Scottish ballads on the record player, lighting up the room. The crazy, sad drunk emitted a dangerous contagion, contaminating loved ones. "It's like being on a roundabout, spinning too fast," Fuller writes. "The world is a terrifying, uninged blur and I cannot determine whether it is me, or the world, that has come off its axis."

Fuller always grounds this personal heartbreak in the hard-edged politics of African independence. Soon after the arrival of those squatters, the family is forced to give up the farm. The Fullers move to less productive land — no longer raising tobacco but cattle they capture in the wild — then give up on Zimbabwe altogether. After two years in Hastings Banda's one-party state in neighboring Malawi, they settle in Kenneth Kaunda's one-party state in Zambia. Oddly, Fuller never

explains why her parents chose this life of exile in the first place, nor why they remained where they clearly weren't wanted.

Partial explanation no doubt lies in the beauty and exotica so scintillatingly described in their daughter's memoir. For the Fullers could never have experienced in Britain what is just another extraordinary day in Africa:

"We pass, without comment or surprise, small, rain-ready herds of impala. The ewes are swollen with impending babies, but the babies will come only with the first rain. Dad stops to let a pair of warthogs charge fatly in front of us, round-bottomed and heads held up high. A kudu bull stares us down — the perfect white 'V' on his nose a hunter's target. He is sniffing the air and then, with a magnificent leap, his horns laid across his back like medieval weapons, he is gone, plunging grayly into the cross-hatched bush." ■

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

New Material For Coward's Old 'Sail'

WITH THE PERMISSION of the Noël Coward estate, **Claudia Shear's** next project will be retooling the book of "Sail Away" for a New York Theatre Workshop revival of the 1961 musical to be directed by **Christopher Ashley**.

The Coward musical, about a shipboard romance between a cruise director and a well-heeled passenger, had a short run on Broadway, but made a star of **Elaine Stritch**, who recounts the career highlight in her current hit show, "At Liberty." Shear said the show would be workshopped some time later this year at NYTW, where she developed both "Blown Sideways Through Life," with Ashley, and "Dirty Blonde," with **James Lapine**. "I'm not sure how we'll do it, but right now I'm sort of researching [in] how many musicals the star has both the romantic and the comic songs," said Shear, reached in Washington, D.C., where she launched the first leg of a 20-week national tour of "Dirty Blonde." (Later this month, **Sally Mayes** takes over from Shear in the romantic comedy.) Shear mentioned "Funny Lady" and "Hello, Dolly!" as examples, adding that Coward had originally written the musical with two leads: the pretty romantic heroine and the comic sidekick, as was the convention at the time. During its troubled tryout in Philadelphia, however, Coward came to the conclusion, Shear says, that "the pretty lady" wasn't working out and the "funny lady" was, and so combined the two roles into one, Stritch's cruise hostess, Mimi. While the show flopped on Broadway, it went on to a respectable run in London's West End. Stritch also starred in a 1999 reading of the musical at Carnegie's Weill Concert Hall to celebrate Coward's centenary. In addition, she sings "Why Do the Wrong People Travel?" from "Sail Away" in her musical memoir, "At Liberty." "Elaine's given me her blessing, so it's OK," Shear said. "I wouldn't do it without it."

Meanwhile, you have one more chance to catch "At Liberty" in its original venue, the Public's Newman Theatre, before it transfers to Broadway's Neil Simon Theatre beginning Feb. 6. On Jan. 9, Stritch will perform the critically acclaimed show for a benefit for the Public Theatre. Tickets are \$500 to \$1,000 and include a party following the performance. (Call 212-539-8739.)

Bittersweet Look at Marriage

Fans who are alarmed that the lawsuit between **Stephen Sondheim** and producer **Scott Rudin** may tie up the composer's "Gold!" for years can take heart that another musical enmeshed in legal wrangling will emerge this spring Off-Broadway.

Last fall, there were reports that **Jason Robert Brown's** "Last Five Years," which received raves when it premiered at a Chicago theater earlier in the year, had run afoul of

a New York production because the composer's ex-wife claimed that it violated their divorce agreement. The two-character show, about the bittersweet marriage between an ambitious Jewish writer and an Irish-Catholic actress, had been expected to be part of Lincoln Center Theater's season, but was dropped apparently after a threatening letter was sent by the lawyer of the ex-Mrs. Jason Robert Brown. Producers **Marty Bell** and **Arielle Tepper**, however, picked up the show and now it is poised to begin performances on Feb. 12 at the Minetta Lane Theatre. The musical will star **Norbert Leo Butz**, who created the role of the nice Jewish boy, and **Sherie Renee Scott**, the star of "Aida," who takes

over the role of the nice Irish-American girl from **Lauren Kennedy**, who's in London starring as Nellie Forbush in **Trevor Nunn's** new revival of "South Pacific." Brown adamantly refused to talk about past legal wrangles over the show, but admitted that the writing of it had been therapeutic. "Only insofar as I was able to write something after 'Parade,'" he says of the Lincoln Center Theatre musical that won him a Tony Award

and a cult following, but failed to ignite with the critics. "It was a joy writing something that was funny and small, something that I had control over, something that would be my own little show."

Directing the musical is **Daisy Prince**, daughter of the legendary **Harold Prince** and a longtime champion of Brown's, who also directed his theatrical calling card, "Songs for a New World," at the WPA Theatre in the early '90s.

Brown says the show tackles many of the questions facing young married couples as traditional roles and expectations have disintegrated. "Now it's a question of how do you have a successful marriage and still grow as an individual? Where does a couple find true fulfillment, in each other or in other goals and ambitions?"

On the Schedule

Crista Moore (Tony nominee for "Gypsy" and "Big") co-stars with **Keith Reddin** in a new version of Moliere's farce "Tartuffe," directed by **Jeff Cohen** at the Worth Theatre's Tribeca Playhouse (111 Reade St., Manhattan), beginning performances Jan. 12. It is the Worth Theatre's critically acclaimed production of **Christopher Shinn's** "Four" that will be transferring to Manhattan Theatre Club in February. . . . Rapper **Mos Def** has been tapped by director **George C. Wolfe** to co-star with **Jeffrey Wright** in the Broadway transfer of the Public Theatre's production of **Suzan-Lori Parks' "Topdog / Underdog,"** beginning in March at the Ambassador Theatre. ■

E-mail Patrick Pacheco at pacheco@nyct.net.



Patrick Pacheco